

Freshers' Sermon 2014, 12th October 5.45pm Choral Evensong

Ruth 1.1-16; Matthew 12.46-50

In nomine...

'Is Fresher's Week all that it's cracked up to be?' That was the headline of an interesting article in *Cherwell* two days ago. One correspondent said that it was, describing it – and remember, this is meant to be a good thing – as *the most debauched of times and the most tragic of times, a time of agonizing awkwardness, an opportunity for gathering blackmail material for your future friends (and enemies)*. So much for the pro-Fresher's Week correspondent. The other correspondent, distinctly lukewarm about the whole concept, writes thusly: *Fresher's Week is not some friend-making nirvana, but more a first world nightmare, alleviated only by the inebriation.*

Views there, not of your mature and eyebrow-raising Chaplain, but of students themselves. Mmmm. Well don't worry. We've all been there, to some extent or another (though I was never one for dressing up as Elizabeth I or one of the powerpuff girls – whoever they might be: from Brookes presumably). But while I am quite concerned about too much booze, and very concerned about too much of quite a lot of other things, the thing that worries me most is REGRESSION.

Regression? Really? And if some of you are still hung over from your last outing and can't actually remember any longish English words, the OED will tell you that Regression is from the Latin *regressio*. It means repetition, return, reversion, reversal. It means going backwards. Psychologically, especially: reversion to an earlier or less developed psychological state, as a defensive response to circumstances. Sound familiar? I'd be surprised if it didn't. Strange things happen when we find ourselves somewhere new, and somewhere else. We find that we are changing into someone else. And that freaks us out, and makes us, at our worst, drink too much, flirt too much, and – well, just insert your own word – too much. Regression can lead to aggression. Regression can make us want to curl up in a ball and long for home.

Ruth longed for home. Ruth is not, by the way, someone you met at Junction the other night after it had taken you seventeen Fruit Shooters to realise they are in fact alcoholic. Ruth was the heroine of our first reading tonight. In

Hebrew (new students should get accustomed, by the way, to my introducing pretty much anything with the phrase 'in Hebrew') Ruth means "friend". My husband finds Ruth amazing because she adores her mother-in-law. But that's the point of Ruth. She is amazing. And she is amazing because of her faithfulness. She sticks with her mother-in-law, Naomi, who has been bereaved time and again. Mother-in-law Naomi encourages Ruth to return to where she came from; but loving daughter-in-law Ruth says no. She will not regress. She won't go back. She will stay with Naomi. Not regression. Progression.

The words "go back" or "return" happen all over this passage. Ruth chooses not to regress. She chooses to progress - to look forward, to move forward, to embrace the something else, the something new. Just as well she did. Because the result of Ruth's choice was a family from whom descended David, Israel's greatest King, and, eventually, Jesus Christ, who not only gave His name to our college, but – and this is honestly the more important fact of the two – turned out to be the Saviour of the World.

Jesus was a very difficult son – ask Mary. And a very difficult brother – ask his brothers, he had quite a few. We know this from the Gospels' and we skate over it too quickly. Jesus completely reimagined what family was – and that's part of the reason that the church is in such a state over human relationships right now. I'll be frank with you. If we had a new student who, should his mum and siblings turn up at the Lodge, ignored them, and told us that his best mates were his mum and his siblings, the lovely welfare reps and I might want to be on the phone to the University Counselling Services very quickly. But that's what Jesus says. I am sure he did love his mother, and his family – but he wasn't afraid to say some extraordinary things about them in order to make his point. And that point is? Progression. He can't go back. He can't be a child in Nazareth again. Times have changed. He's been tempted by the devil, he's preached, healed, exorcized, taught, fed, loved, loved, and loved again, all the people that society said that he shouldn't. You can't turn back from that.

Neither can you – and that goes not only for our lovely Freshers, but also those who are back for their second third and fourth – and for some of us, sixth, tenth, twentieth Michaelmas terms. We have all changed since we last met. We will all go on changing. And the circumstances of life present us with

a choice. We can go one way or another, forwards or backwards, regress, or progress.

Our readings tonight challenge us to make the right choice. Not regressing, but progressing. And this is a common theme to lots of classic spiritual literature. The English writer and preacher John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* – never once out of print since its publication in 1678 – is the story of Christian, making his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City via some wonderfully recognizable characters and all too recognizable places. It has given our language some of its truly memorable phrases. It has also given thousands of Christians a reimagined route map for faith. C. S. Lewis adored it, and it inspired him to write *The Pilgrim's Regress*, which is an analogous and autobiographical account of his own journey to faith.

Bunyan's pilgrim, 'who did true valour see', was always moving forward, no matter how tough the going got: circumnavigating Vanity Fair, and the Slough of Despond, in order to land safe on the other (Canaan's) side. So did Ruth. Refusing to look back, she grew, she was faithful, and she loved.

You haven't had to contend with the problems that faced Ruth, or Bunyan's pilgrim. But you have had to do something rather traumatic, in fact. You have left home, you have come to something else, something new, something which is very different from anything you have encountered before. We know that that's tough. We also know that it's going to be ok.

But for it to be ok, you have to make the right choice. It's a free country, of course; you can, if you choose to, regress. You can look back, collude with a former you who used to exist, and allow yourself to be seduced into being someone who might look a bit like you, but is in fact a Jagerbomb-swilling, tute-avoiding monstrosity who's actually overshoot the Ladosphere – well, good luck with that; or you can choose to progress. This is the harder one, this is what needs real guts: because it involves moving into the unknown, taking risks, being brave, and working hard, in the lab, on the field, in the library, and in the million tiny ways in which relationships and friendships that last for ever get forged.

I hope you will choose the second. Jesus will always be there for you when you make progress. Jesus will always be there to catch you, set you straight, help you learn, help you grow. That's what Jesus does.

But Megan – when you talk about Jesus – do you mean a college in Oxford? Or the Son of God?

Well – you're grown up now. You work it out. If you can do that, you're making progress already.